

POTS FROM THE WHITE BREAD AND MAYO BELT

A CREATIVE PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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## List of Images

**Figure 1.** Brandl, Jessica. *Vessel*, 2018

**Figure 2.** Uliano, Theo. *Plate*. Ceramic, 2017

**Figure 3.** Valenzuela, Shalene. *Telephone*, 2018

**Figure 4.** McLaughlin, Mary Louise. *Covered Jewel Box*, Ceramic and China Paint, 1888.

**Figure 5.** Ice Cream Parlor

**Figure 6.** *One of These Is Not Like the Others*

**Figure 7.** *The Difference Between These Things and Their Surroundings*

**Figure 8.** *The Line Between Us Is Vague but Apparent*

**Figure 9.** *Sweet, Even if I Appear Salty*

**Figure 10.** *Fat Boy*

**Figure 11.** *Not Quite the Escape I Was Looking For*

### **Abstract**

In this exhibition I have created a variety of installations based around pottery forms. Working with the potter's wheel and a variety of techniques, I create pots that are coated in a white slip and decorated with hand painted imagery and pattern. This surface provides a canvas for me to paint imagery that is representative of traditional American tattoos by building up layers of color and tone with the use of ceramic colorants and washes. The rationale for the pattern and imagery is to create a sense of subverted normality for the viewer. The patterns represent rules and order which are experienced through social structures as family, politics, and religion. The tattooed imagery is the subversive counterpoint to prescribed ideals. The interplay of imagery and pattern create dynamic surfaces that cooperate with the forms that are intended to visually engage the viewer. The goal with this project is to discuss and critique the social structures through which we learn self-identity.

## Statement of The Problem

The current field of functional ceramics is intricately linked to the history and evolution of ceramics as form and function are elements of design that potters have utilized for thousands of years dependent on the needs of their cultures. For example, the teacup in its original form did not include a handle, unlike the modern version we know today. This change occurred because of the English's fondness for hot tea, which would scald their hands when consumed from a cup with no handle. Other similar adaptations in the functions of pottery have evolved alongside a variety of cultures as needs have changed. The functionality and willingness of the craft to adapt to its surroundings makes it a universal medium. It is this characteristic that makes pottery an excellent vehicle for creative expression.

Historically, ceramics have offered a means by which artists can convey social and political issues to a broad audience of people, and whether as an artist, or on behalf of a patron commissioning work, ceramic objects are an excellent medium for making and expressing thoughts and ideas. One well known example is sixteenth-century Italian majolica wares that are painted with a variety of religious and social figures such as monks and politicians. These figures are placed in the foreground amongst animals such as dogs and donkeys in order to create a comparison between human and animal behavior. These pots express social and political dissidence by using images and symbolism to criticize the "highly politicized environment" of the Renaissance era.<sup>1</sup> These illustrations were influenced by the clash of ideas between intellectualism of progressive views and the antiquated religious structures that progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Clare, *Subversive Ceramics*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 41.

thinkers viewed as a hindrance to social growth. The social conditions during the Renaissance era provided ample amounts of subject matter for the potters and generated the need for expressive functional pots to discuss those conditions. Majolica pots served needs for function and expression during their time. Currently, many contemporary artists create pots to serve the same needs.

Many contemporary potters utilize a variety of images to add content to their work. Paul Scott is a prolific contemporary potter who uses glaze decal images on the surface of porcelain plates as a means of criticizing social themes such as politics, war and economics. Scott uses images of displaced people, bombed cityscapes, militaria, and natural scenery to express his ideas. Although his work utilizes and references the traditional techniques of porcelain and cobalt imagery often found on historical pots, the thematic imagery in Scott's work creates a conversation about current issues that he sees as important or problematic.

Another artist who works with pots and images is Jessica Brandl, who frames her work as a way to explore her personal history through narrative. Although her work does not directly address social issues, Brandl creates a dialogue with the viewer as her pots engage visual representations of personal themes. Brandl uses images of home interiors and exteriors, birds, cars, and beer cans to express ideas of home and her own life and experiences growing up in Texas. The images that adorn her work creates the narrative that Brandl uses to express her personal history.

### **Review of Literature and Influences**

As a material-based conceptual artist it is important that my work illustrates a strong command of materials and craftsmanship, but it is also important that my work be intellectually developed. I utilize functional pottery to engage the audience in a critique of social structures,

and to investigate how we learn self-identity through social interaction, religion, family, and politics. The thought process behind my work has been heavily influenced by a broad range of artists working in a variety of media. Within the scope of this work I have narrowed my focus to a select few artists and literary resources that I see as most influential.

### **Brandl, Uliano and Valenzuela**

Jessica Brandl is a vessel maker who has impacted the way I think about my work visually and conceptually. Brandl incorporates surface sculpting and a myriad of icons and symbols into her work. She sculpts and paints cars, beer cans, homes, human skeletons, and birds on her forms to create a narrative about her personal history and experiences. [Fig. 1] Brandl's vessels speak to her life growing up in the Midwest, which is a conceptual component I relate to with her work. The images Brandl uses speak

to specific moments in her own life, but they are not so specific that the viewer cannot relate to them. Rather, the images read as cultural indicators to which I bring a certain set of preconceptions. I am not suggesting I have the same personal experiences as Brandl, rather, the iconography and images she utilizes are

recognizable to me based on similar geographic cultural experiences. Rather, it is her use of personal moments and memories are what make her work so intriguing to me. Although our work is vastly different visually and conceptually, Brandl's vessels and thought process have helped inform my own artistic practice.



*Figure 1*

I also appreciate Brandl's use of the vessel as her chosen medium for expressing ideas to her audience. In an interview from 2017 Brandl states, "The narrative vessels I construct are beyond practical utility in most ways but my adherence to the void interior and vestigial function permits me to use the language."<sup>2</sup> I relate to the practice of using the vessel and teetering on the point of function and non-practicality with my own pots. Most importantly, Brandl's work has informed the way I think about vessels as a medium to convey ideas.

One of the earliest visual influences on my work is Theo Uliano, who is best known for fast and loose pots that are decorated with layers of slip and underglazes.[Fig. 2] Although my pots are engaged in a different conversation than Uliano's, the techniques that generate the surface of his work are directly related to my processes and have helped me reach visual goals with my own work. Uliano's use of a white slip on top of an earthenware clay body to cover his pots and then layers loose gestural sketches on top of the slip. His sketches are developed with lines and blocks of color that are sometimes blended and overlapped. Uliano chooses colors that are bright and vivid and he balances warm and cool colors to create striking visual compositions around his pottery forms. One critical difference in subject matter between myself and Uliano is that he often references the human form in his paintings, whereas the images I use are not representative of the figure.



Figure 2

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<sup>2</sup> Green, Joshua, "A Conversation with Jessica Brandl." *NCECA Blog*, November 3, 2017

Aside from the visual aspects of Uliano's work, I admire his method of finding subject matter and content to influence his drawings. In his artist statement Uliano states, "The vessel and painting are the only constants through my disjointed working methods...the surface paintings can be simple narratives that are derived from my everyday life, or gestural and intuitive expressions of emotion and material."<sup>3</sup> I find this portion of Uliano's artist statement poignant and relatable to my own practice in thinking how my surroundings influence the work I make. Where Uliano references narratives of daily life with his work, I reference my personal history through memory.

Shalene Valenzuela primarily creates slip cast sculptures that are generated from common household items. Valenzuela casts toasters, blenders, vacuum cleaners, corsets and telephones to create a canvas for her images. The mixture of printed and painted images on her cast objects provides the perfect medium for Valenzuela to express her ideas about social constructs. Specifically in her work titled *Telephone: Listen and Learn* [Fig. 3] the female figures seem to be engaged in some secret conversation. Valenzuela has placed these specific images on the phone to play up the trope of the gossiping and chatty female. *Telephone* gives me an sense of overt satire and humor which serves to subvert the assumptions of the "Idealized time period" she is critiquing.<sup>4</sup> As Valenzuela states, "My narratives explore topics ranging from fairytales, urban mythologies, consumer culture, societal expectations, etiquette, and coming-of-age issues."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Uliano, Theo. "Statement." Theouliano.com

<sup>4</sup> Valenzuela, Shalene. "About." Shalene.com

<sup>5</sup> Valenzuela, Shalene. "About." Shalene.com



Valenzuela addresses social issues in a way that has helped me to understand my own perspective and what I choose to address. My work differs from Valenzuela's visually, but also in the specific social expectations that I address. Her work focuses visually and conceptually on feminine issues in relation to social expectations. As a female artist Valenzuela has a perspective on the issues women face that I cannot share. However, the manner in which she approaches and informs her sculptures makes them visually



Figure 3

appealing and conceptually potent; characteristics I aim to achieve with my own work.

### **Suzanne Staubach and Aaris Sharin**

In early art historical discussions it is apparent that clay and ceramics have played an integral role for people throughout history. In fact, some of the oldest objects that we use to understand past civilizations are ceramic. To dig deeper into the history of ceramics I found Suzanne Staubach's book titled *Clay* to be quite informative<sup>6</sup>. *Clay* begins its discourse with the history of ceramics related to pots for cooking and storage of food. A key point that Staubach makes is that without proper pots, "Real cooking could not begin".<sup>7</sup> The point of Staubach's statement is the significance of the link between the development of pottery as it served to

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<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Staubach. *Clay: A History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's most Primal Element*. New York: Berkely Publishing Group

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Staubach. *Clay: A History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's most Primal Element*, 3

nurture the growth of civilizations and culture. Not only did ceramic wares enable cooking, but they also allowed a variety of foods to be stored and transported<sup>8</sup>.

In my opinion the transportation and trade of ceramic pots is the spark that ignited a global sharing of ceramic aesthetics. As a pot moves from its place of origin to a different location, various peoples are exposed to its form and its decoration. The visual elements of the pot are then observed and sometimes mimicked or fully reproduced, generating cross cultural influence based around a simple functional object.

Staubach's investigation moves through time and cultures all over the world as she discusses the development and role of clay. She brings her conversation into contemporary uses for clay as a material for a variety of industries including the automobile industry, electrical industry and aerospace technologies.<sup>9</sup> Although the specific use of clay by industry is not directly related to my creative endeavors, I do find value in the information Staubach presents. She illustrates the expansive use of clay in ways that I do not typically consider. For example, the impact of the industrial revolution on studio ceramics is immense. Prior to the industrial revolution, most ceramic wares were handmade to serve very specific functions based on physical needs. Once the industrial revolution reached the ceramics field, mass production of ceramics began and the need for handmade wares rapidly waned. At first this seems to be a negative impact on the need for handmade objects, but instead this incurred a change within studio ceramics. Instead of a demand for potters to create strictly utilitarian wares, the focus of the craftsmen shifted and allowed them to create vessels that were more creative and artistic.

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<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Staubach. *Clay: A History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's most Primal Element*, 11

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Staubach. *Clay: A History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's most Primal Element*, 190

Although historical examples of expressive pots predate the industrial revolution, the main focus of pottery was utility. It is from this shift in focus of pottery that I am able to use clay for my own creative endeavors. As an artist I view and use clay in a very specific way to achieve my aesthetic goals, but thinking about ceramics and its history solely as a material lends unique and unexpected perspective on my artistic practice.

The historical evidence that Staubach presents helps me understand and distill the broad evolution of ceramics and how that evolution led to the studio ceramics movement of the late nineteenth-century. It is apparent the roots of my own work and that of my influences can be traced back to ceramics studio craft movement and the works of artists such as Mary McLaughlin.<sup>10</sup> Although mostly decorative, McLaughlin's painted ceramics illustrate a major point in American ceramics where the focus shifted to individual creativity through the use of process and technique. [Fig. 4] This understanding allows me to see how the field of ceramics has developed into a culture that allows me to access and use clay as an expressive medium.

More directly related to some of the visual components of my work is Aaris Sharin's book, *Design Elements: Color Fundamentals*. As the title suggests, this book focuses on the use of color in design. Although the text primarily focuses on computer based graphic design, there are many topics and themes that I glean from this source and apply to



Figure 4

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, Garth and Margie Hughto. *A Century of Ceramics in the United States: 1878-1978*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979

my work where I utilize color. Sharin states, “Color affects mood...it can evoke atmosphere and convey symbolism”.<sup>11</sup> The idea of using color to instill a sense of mood is something I observe when looking at the artwork of others but I also bring that practice into my own work to help convey my ideas to the viewer.

Patterned displays on which I situate my work and the color choices I make are rooted in the notion if chosen properly, the patterns can instill a sense of mood with the viewer. I use colors that were popular in during the 1950s and 60s, which I see as a time period that bolstered idealized values of American culture. Sherin states, “ Culture and geographic location affect people’s perception and understanding of color.”<sup>12</sup> It is by this concept I am bringing the associations of color based on my personal experiences within my own culture to add to the content of my pots. Growing up in rural Midwest America the culture supported values and stereotypes of old fashioned mid-century American norms. These ideas are what my work is discussing. To reference this time period I choose rich saturated colors such as green, blue, and red as the starting point for my palette, but I tone them down with a fair portion of white to create a softer pastel hue.

Using pastels on a white surface gives my pots a light hearted and playful appearance. The pattern is also used to symbolise order and rules that are prescribed by mid-century social structures. Pastel colors are not as concentrated with color and therefore less jarring to the eyes of the viewer. This sets a tone with the viewer and makes the pattern more playful due to its soft color, making the patterns approachable, desirable, and seemingly innocuous. The patterns are

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<sup>11</sup> Aaris Sherin. *Design Elements: Color Fundamentals*, 82

<sup>12</sup> Aaris Sherin. *Design Elements: Color Fundamentals*, 86

intended to be disrupted by tattoo images, thus illustrating a departure from the rules they represent.

I also disrupt the pattern with images that use dense black lines and darker color schemes. This strategy choice reflects Sharin's observation that "a color or combination of hues can foreshadow the theme or nature of the message".<sup>13</sup> Consequently, I observed the ability of color to bolster the content of my work. This research gave way to exploring vintage ice cream shops [Fig. 5], candy stores, and their advertisements where I noticed patterns and color schemes. The patterns and colors are what I chose to bring to my pots operate on the technique of using hue and tone to instill a sense of mood to the viewer. Seeing how color and tone can create mood led me to examine how this is done by other artists and it gave me a deeper understanding of how artists convey their own messages with color and images.

### **Subversive and Confrontational Ceramics**

One of the enduring philosophies within my own artistic endeavors is that ceramics has the potential to adapt to many uses. I have seen ceramics used to create simple functional objects, large scale sculptures, installations and performance art. Claire's observations within the field of contemporary ceramics has shown me clay's dynamic ability to express ideas. I



Figure 5

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<sup>13</sup> Aaris Sherin. *Design Elements: Color Fundamentals*, 83

have found two main sources to bolster this opinion which are focused on the discussion of ceramics and social topics.

First, Claudia Clare's *Subversive Ceramics* brings a wide and detailed look into ceramics in both historical and contemporary contexts.<sup>14</sup> The objective with her book is, "To build a substantial body of knowledge on the relationship between ceramics, politics, political movements, and the way we express these ideas through the form."<sup>15</sup> Mostly focusing on the relationship between politics and ceramics, Clare provides ample discussions of ceramic works that document and criticize political situations. A few of the specific works Clare mentions are pots from Renaissance Italy, the French Revolution, and anti-slavery wares to illustrate her discussion. As she states, "Potters, historically have been politically engaged" it seems that any occasion of political turmoil provides fodder for ceramic protest.<sup>16</sup>

Quite obviously some political issues are more severe than others, which in turn may affect how they are addressed. But undoubtedly political opinion no matter to what degree can be expressed through a variety of ceramic work. This not to say my work is expressing some state of revolt or political protest. Rather, my work is rooted in the observation of my own surroundings and opinions. Within my own experiences I have predominantly been exposed to conservatism and patriotism. I find these ideas prevalent in the rural midwestern culture where I formulated my political views. However, I have always felt compelled to opposing political views. I do not focus on expressing my own social views, rather, my goal is to express the disparate nature of holding opposing opinions when surrounded by social counterparts.

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<sup>14</sup> Clare, Claudia. *Subversive Ceramics*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Clare, Claudia. *Subversive Ceramics*, 12

<sup>16</sup> Clare, Claudia. *Subversive Ceramics*, 43

A second major source of literature is Judith Schwartz's *Confrontational Ceramics*.<sup>17</sup> In this text Schwartz covers a myriad of socially minded artists and artworks that span a variety of social topics. Politics, social conditions, gender identity, and environmental issues are all covered through visual examples and artist discussions. Specifically chapter 2 titled *The Social and Human Condition* has been informative to my own practice.<sup>18</sup> Here Schwartz presents artists and artworks that address, "The questions asked for centuries: who am I? What am I? How do I function in this world?." <sup>19</sup> These questions drive at the root of my creative work. The ultimate goal is expressing how I have answered these questions in order to formulate my self-identity within the context of the social conditions around me.

Seeing how other artists have answered these questions with visual artworks and by reading critical dialogue of their thought processes has aided me in my own artistic practice. By gleaned this information and applying it to my own work I have been able to make more informed choices on how to visually represent the ideas behind my work. The information I have obtained from *Confrontational Ceramics* has aided my process of working from ideas and research and connecting that information to visual elements in my own work. This process is shown in the color and image choices I use for my pots and how I choose to contextualize them.

### **Description and Images of Work**

As a contemporary functional potter my work fits into the linear continuum of ceramics by virtue of technique and content. Similar to the aforementioned artists, my work is

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<sup>17</sup> Schwartz, Judith. *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Schwartz, Judith. *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic*, 54

<sup>19</sup> Schwartz, Judith. *Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic*, 54

not strictly adherent to traditional techniques or methods of making, however, I do utilize tools and methods to create my work that have been used frequently throughout history. Integral to my process is the potter's wheel which where most of my work begins. The wheel is an efficient way to work with the vessel because I can build and alter pots to my preferences. Once I build my forms I then cover the surface with white slip, which provides a blank canvas for painted images. I then draw on the surface of my work with patterns and then utilize the aesthetics of vintage American tattoos to disrupt the pattern. The pattern, bold lines and vibrant color formulate the visual style of tattoos and provide a method of expression that is visually appealing to the viewer.

Growing up in a religious family in the Midwest during the 80s and 90s I was taught that tattoos were a bad thing. This idea stemmed from social misconceptions about the participants of tattoo culture. As I matured and began formulating my own opinions I began rethinking the ideals that were taught to me and I started seeing tattoos as a signifier of rebellion and otherness. In my late teens I started working as a tattoo artist and became increasingly active in tattoo counter culture. The more I embraced alternative perspectives to the social values that I learned in my childhood the more I became aware of the world around me and how I related to my environment. My activity and participation in tattoo culture provided a catalyst for me to develop my self-identity and allowed me a counter point to question what I had been taught. Although tattoos are physical and tangible, I see them as symbols of learning and navigating the personal experiences that allowed me to formulate my own self-identity. It is within this framework that I utilize tattoo styled images on my work.

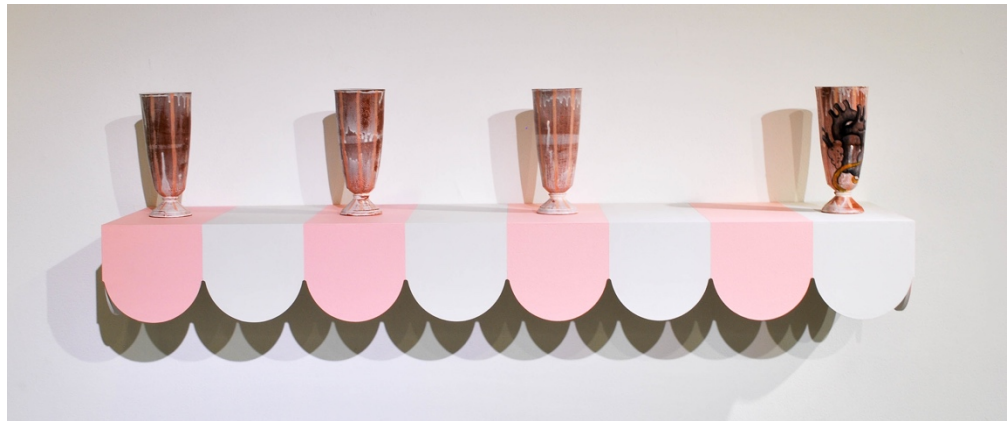
Incorporating references to vintage tattoos onto the surface creates visual intrigue and grabs the attention of the viewer. The stylistic elements of tattoos now makes the work



approachable to a broad range of people. As the viewer sees and realizes the visual elements, they gain a deeper understanding of the work and what I am communicating. It is through this communication I am able to address how a variety of social structures including family, religion, and economics influenced my formulation of self-identity. I see these experiences as personal to me, but also applicable to many people.

Like many other artists I utilize influences from outside of ceramics to inform my work. I employ a social methodology to critique assumptions and expectations of behavior and character that are based on prescribed ideals learned through a variety of social structures. The discussion within

my work is rooted in the exploration of personal experiences of my life in the



*Figure 6*

rural Midwest. The pots I make are a way to express thoughts on moments where I have felt like “the other” or feeling at odds with my social environment. I use the pots I make to reference times when I felt incongruent with the social structures that informed my life such as religious practices, social mores, political views, and family values. Ideas of the nuclear family, participation within religious groups, and prescribed political views which influenced my family who reared me, became outdated and unrealistic for me, but they served as a counterpoint from which I began to understand myself and develop my own identity. For example, I make ceramic

ice cream dishes that reference old-fashioned style ice cream shops as a means of commenting on social structures of an idealized time period [Fig. 6].

To illustrate this with my work I position my pots within context of pattern so that the imagery clashes with its surroundings [Fig. 7-11]. Patterns operate on mathematical rules to create predictable and rhythmic results. The predictability and rules that are inherent to patterns allow me to use them as a design element to add content to my work. I use the patterns to represent the ideas that are learned through family, religion, and politics, which

prescribe specific codes of behavior, similar to the way patterns give a sense of visual order. The tattoo styled images do not follow pattern, rather, I use them to break and disrupt the pattern. I use them symbolize my personal rebellion against those social structures. By juxtaposing patterns with imagery I subvert the idealized life of how I was taught to live, versus how I choose to live. Through this process I have developed my own self-identity.



Figure 7

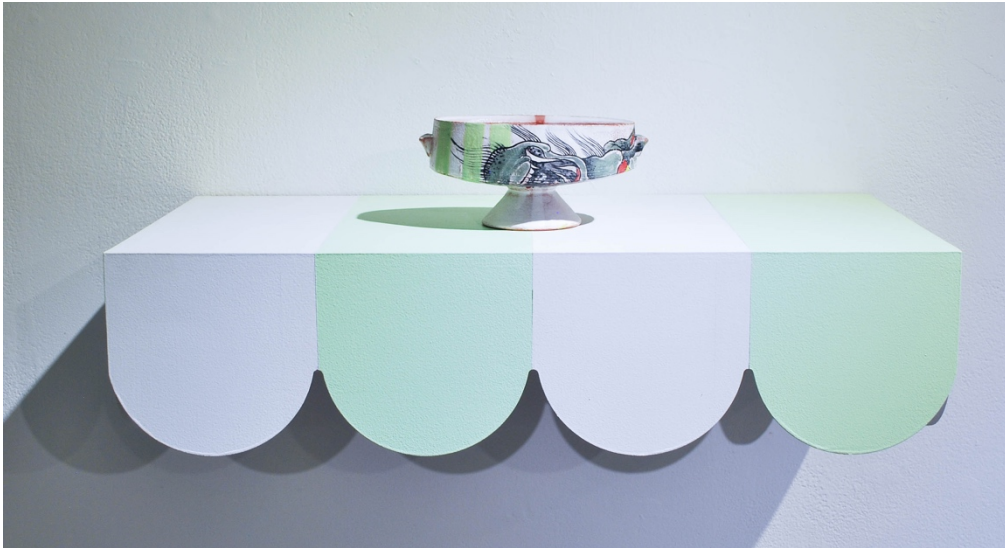


Figure 8



Figure 9





Figure 10



Figure 11

## **Conclusion**

The process of creating these objects has been long and laborious. The discussions and critiques always cause me to reflect back upon myself and think about the what fuels my making. Through this thinking it seems as though it is impossible to separate myself, my personal history, and my art work from one another. These things are inherently linked and somewhere within the complexity of my own humanness I strive to understand the world around me. At its root, my work is based in these efforts. These objects are the product of my thoughts as I relate to my environment.

The narrative that is created in developing my understanding is not isolated or specific to me. The ideas are broader than a singular person. Rather, they are experienced by many. It is my hope other people can view my work and recognize the effort to understand the self in relationship to the broader world. I hope that the viewer can glean a sense of relatability through the objects I create.

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< <https://shalene.com/about-1> >

## **Exhibition Statement**

The work in this exhibition illustrates the culmination of the technical and conceptual research I have executed during my time at Ball State. I study sociological themes that I find intriguing to me based on my personal experiences with the world around me. These experiences and observations are informative to the aesthetic choices that I make to create this body of work. What you see are material based conceptual objects that utilize craft and function in order to create a dialogue about social structures and their influence on the ways we form self-identity. The majority of works in this exhibition are created with clay that has been wheel thrown, altered, and constructed. For the surface of my pots I use a variety of decorating materials and techniques including slip combined with drawing and painting with layers of underglaze and oxide washes. The interplay between the pots and the way they are displayed is intended to give the viewer a sense of mood and tone. The pastel colors I use for the patterns create a sense of light heartedness and create a dichotomy with the dark and concentrated hues that are used in the images. I pay attention to the choices of patterns, images, and color to visually connect my work to the sociological ideas that influence it. The pots and their surfaces are the medium in which I choose to express my ideas and visually communicate with the viewer. I see pottery as a medium that is familiar and approachable cross culturally, and therefore provides a solid platform to express my ideas to my audience.